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Meshes of Muteness: Maya Deren's Languages

Circumlocution on the too real wheel

finds twice reflection:

once upon the screen

and once upon the transient, evacuated minds possessing pews.

Eleanora Derenkowsky, 'Cinema' (1937)

Born Eleanora Derenkowsky in Kiev, Ukraine in 1917, the young girl who was later to rename herself Maya Deren immigrated to Syracuse, New York with her parents in 1922. As a schoolgirl and throughout her university years Deren was an aspiring poet, but she declares retrospectively that she was not a very good one because her mind worked in images, which she had been trying in vain to describe in verbal terms. When she began making films, she explains, she realized that she no longer had to translate images into words: 'it was not like discovering a new medium so much as finally coming home into a world whose vocabulary, syntax, grammar was my mother tongue; which I understood and thought in, but, like a mute, had never spoken.'¹ *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) taught her to speak in this language and she credits her collaborator and then second husband, the Czech émigré and avant-garde filmmaker Alexander Hammid, with contributing the mechanics of this speech. Deren transposes her mental images into her films, yet she still talks of film in terms of a language. The transitions and translations that she uses to define where she feels most at home – from word to image, poetry to film – hark back to her initial linguistic and cultural displacement, which lies beyond articulable memory but which is recuperated through the image-making of imagination, creating a bond to a

mother tongue that is imagistic, a return home without regression to a pre-linguistic state.

Beginnings: Languages and Images

Although her parents were fluent in Russian, and family life prior to their divorce was by all accounts steeped in Russian culture,² Deren does not appear to have been brought up bilingual in the United States. In letters to her mother written in 1927, Deren's father writes notes to his wife Marie around the edges of his daughter's prose: the mother-daughter communication is in English, the parental exchange in Russian.³ Traces of Deren's own relation to Russian do however appear elsewhere in her correspondence. Her earliest letters to her mother include terms of endearment as Eleanora signs off frequently as Elinka. Later, during her teenage years at the École Internationale de Genève, an emergent skill for learning languages extends to a desire to learn Russian. She writes to her mother on October 17, 1930: 'I know I will be able to speak French by Christmas. I am going to take Russian once a week with the Russian teacher. I am anxious to learn the alphabet [sic] and to speak more fluently.'⁴ Although making more abundant use of French terminology in her correspondence, she attempts to open and sign off a couple of letters to her mother in Russian, which is evidence of her enthusiasm and progress.⁵

Deren's interest in Russian culture broadens as the years advance. She reports that she likes Tolstoy very much in a letter of December 16, 1930 and is reading *Anna Karenina* for a book report by 1933.⁶ In the summer of 1936 she reads about Russian history, art, and politics,⁷ and the archive contains a densely packed notebook devoted to Russian history from this time.⁸ Upon her return to

the States after her Swiss schooling, she could speak French and had proved herself an accomplished linguist; yet when an article appears on her in the *Syracuse Post Standard* on September 21, 1933, reporting that she speaks five languages, she corrects this in a letter to her friend Shirley: 'I told them I understood Russian and some German, which is the truth, and that I had had Spanish, which I did, this summer, so there you are.'⁹ While her first husband, Russian émigré Gregory Bardacke, claims that she did not speak Russian at all,¹⁰ suggesting that her comprehension never resulted in the fluency she desired, Hammid remembers that she liked to sing and would sing Russian songs.¹¹ Most poignantly of all, her mother tells of the last time she saw her daughter in the New York hospital where she died from a brain haemorrhage: 'I knew she liked hearing Russian, I spoke to her in Russian. She said, "Yes, yes, Momchka," but that was all she could say. The nurse asked what language I was speaking. I said Russian, and then I looked at Elinka...'¹² With the bulk of her writings in English,¹³ Russian remains absent from Deren's written prose but accompanies her nevertheless throughout her life. Prior to her emergence as a filmmaker, she reflects on this cultural and linguistic inheritance in ways that gesture towards her as yet unrealized films.

In 'Self-Portrait by Eleanora Deren Bardacke,' written in 1935, Deren notes the indelible presence of her heritage:

Of my native country I remember only the high red brick wall which edged the botanical gardens in which I played, a fire in our apartment house, the escape over the border, and little else, but my parents (I am an only child) brought with them an environment in which those racial traits of slavish temperament, inherent within me, flourished until it is such a part of me that it cannot be a

memory. That the rest of my environment, Anglo-Saxon, did not penetrate and counter-act it is not difficult to understand, as I will explain.¹⁴

She retains mental images of her childhood and although the learning of Russian came later through the international school system, the embedded images were never displaced by the language or culture of her country of adoption. An even more striking image appears to her, relayed through words, when she writes in a letter to a friend in 1941 of her familiarity with Russia and the Russian language beyond conscious recollection:

When I speak French, I speak it with a Russian accent, they tell me. A Frenchman always knows I'm Russian, not American. I have, suddenly an image of myself: I am like a vine trying to spread over the universe, for I love everything, but the roots are sunk in one spot of that universe. Through all my searching tendrils runs the life of the roots. I am singing it now, do you hear the melancholy, minor notes?¹⁵

Deren speaks here of something that persists through the rhythms and timbre of the voice and that appears to her first in terms of a botanical image. The vivid image of a life that has extended far away from its point of origin but that is still anchored there arises from a simile in her figurative use of English, signifying an on-going connection to a hidden language that speaks through her regardless. Her later description of her entry into filmmaking as a homecoming to a mother tongue that had hitherto remained mute is an echo of these patterns of thinking and writing about her relationship to her Russian background. From the absent language conjured by a verbal image, to the silent mental and visual image, her Russian heritage and her associated imagistic thinking fuse from root to vine.

In keeping with this multi-layered relation to these different senses of the image, both mental/visual and linguistic/figurative, Deren's juvenilia record her enchantment with authors who can prompt the visualization process that constitutes the image-making capacity of the imagination. In a piece of schoolwork from 1930, 'A Book as a Friend,' she writes: 'The intensity of my feeling depends entirely on the ability of the author to picture the characters.'¹⁶ Additionally, writing of the appeal of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, she declares: 'His word pictures become vividly real and in themselves justify our reading of them.'¹⁷ Between these early years when she wrote about reading literature and the point at which she began making films, the poetry of Symbolism, Romanticism, and Imagism, along with her own poetry, would offer a means of reflecting further on definitions of the image from poetic to film language. In keeping with her trajectory from writing to filmmaking, she explores the poetic image first in verbal terms but in a way that leads to the place it will occupy within her theorization of the visual dimension of film, since she understands it explicitly as a facet of the imagination. The shift from her own written poetry to her distinctive sense of film language is one from verbalization to visualization, and while both draw upon and stimulate mental images, her self-declared mother tongue of cinema comes closest to the imagistic point of origin of the Russian that she never fully acquired.

From Poetry to Film

Writing about her poetry, Deren asks: 'When T. E. Hulme, setting forth theories in [sic] behalf of the Imagist School, said that fancy renders things precise, did he mean anything but that imagination discovers the more real realities?'¹⁸ Deren is

fonder of the term imagination than Hulme is, given his preference for fancy over imagination, which reverses Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous hierarchy established in his *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, but she uses it in a non-Romantic sense. Deren posits its importance, not to the extent that it becomes akin to the Baudelairean queen of faculties, but such that her coinage is more down-to-earth than its usage by any of the Romantics and is in greater harmony with the work of both Symbolists and Imagists whom she draws together in her Masters thesis. The image as it appears in Symbolism and Imagism, composed of word-sensations that are syntheses of thought and emotion, contrasts markedly with its other-worldliness in the work of the Romantics.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Imagists' anti-Romanticism chimes with Deren's own subsequent valorization of classicism, whose definition she associates with a concern with form. In one of her graduate papers on poetry she studies a stream of Classicism in the period of nineteenth-century Romanticism.²⁰ In her Masters thesis, she credits the Symbolists with having led to much iconoclasm in form, yet recognizes that they do in fact seek forms that correspond to the emotional content of their expression, and it is this that they have in common with the Imagists.²¹ When she theorizes her film language in future years, carrying forwards her thinking about classicism and form from her research on poetry, discussion of both image and imagination retain their centrality, as she moves from analysing the verbal to the visual register.

In 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film' (1946), she understands art as the process by which the artist's imagination goes to work on the real.²² Moreover, image and imagination are entwined. When defining what an image is in the later 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality' (1960), she identifies

the negative sense of it not being the subject or object represented before she establishes a positive sense: 'it presumes a mental activity, whether in its most passive form (the "mental images" of perception and memory) or, as in the arts, the creative action of the imagination realized by the art instrument.'²³ This interlocking of mental image and imagination in her film theory privileges visualization over verbalization, and so it is that her films are differentiated from her poetry. In 'Cinema as an Art Form' (1946) she writes: 'no verbal description can convey the sense of a medium which is basically visual.'²⁴ She reinforces this belief at a symposium in the year of her death, when pressed about the meaning of her films: 'it has been my observation that one of the means of escaping from experience is articulation. As a matter of fact, this is, exactly, again, the way psychiatry operates: once you've articulated it you no longer suffer it. Now, I'd like you to suffer my films. I'd like you to feel them.'²⁵ Her legendary objections to psychoanalytic readings of her films, which understand them in symbolic terms, hereby widen to refute any possibility of aligning interpretation with the talking cure. *Meshes of the Afternoon* opens the world of the imagination that she describes in 'Choreography for the Camera' (1945), in which the central character moves through an image-based environment, as in day or night dreams.²⁶

Meshes of Image-Making

Meshes of the Afternoon begins with an artificial poppy being placed on a pathway by a mannequin's hand, centre screen. This flower will circulate throughout the film, along with other objects (a key, a knife), passing through different hands in images devoid of sound.²⁷ With a recursive structure that

hinders forward progression, and which Sarah Keller notes is fundamental to Deren's open-ended aesthetic,²⁸ the human figures of the film – Hammid, the cloaked person with a mirrored face, and especially Deren – move around as in a dreamscape. Distinct from the Surrealist interest in dreams as explored, for example, in Salvador Dalí's and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou/An Andalusian Dog* (1929), where objects and subjects are modified before our eyes, Deren and Hammid change neither to achieve their particular blend of dream and nightmare. Suspended actions, canted angles, different shot scales, discontinuous editing, repetition, and slow motion are just some of the means of transforming imaginatively the reality filmed, bringing their vision at times closer to that of Jean Cocteau, whose work Deren admired, albeit within this more muted environment. Dreams have a structure that has been analysed in linguistic terms, and Deren shows awareness of this even as she emphasizes their place within the imagistic imagination.

The connection Annette Michelson makes between Deren's theory in 'Anagram' and that of Roman Jakobson in his work on aphasia is apt in this regard.²⁹ Not only, though, are their respective theories connected with reference to questions of language – Deren speaks of a duality of linguistic structure in terms of a vertical and horizontal axis, while Jakobson speaks of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, the metaphorical and the metonymic – but also with regard to the relationship between language and dream. As Jacques Lacan elaborates with reference to the unconscious, the nightlife of dreaming investigated by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* also has a linguistic structure, and Lacan builds upon Jakobson's categories of metaphor and metonymy following Freud's discussion of condensation and displacement in

the dream work. Deren's preference for the vertical axis, which foregrounds poetic rather than narrative expression, is related to the work of condensation for Freud and the metaphorical or paradigmatic axes for Lacan and Jakobson. Yet her work is also distinct, both with regard to the form of her film art and her comments on spectatorship. Where Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz will explore the relationship between film, dream, and language in the 1970s, working across the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic orders, from the imagistic to the linguistic, and arguing that the spectator is enmeshed in a structure that recalls the psychical patterns of childhood, Deren re-establishes a bond to the imagistic quality of dreams, without specifying such a psychical return, nor wishing to translate this into the verbal dimension. That Deren also refers back unwittingly to her childhood in so doing – the image-based thinking that inspires her films being bound silently to the strength of the mental images of her youth in Russia – is not a retrograde move but a means of re-connecting with an everyday form of imagining that she knows intimately, and which gets lost if converted into words.

Deren's visual aptitude for a 'picture language', as Rudolf Arnheim terms it,³⁰ is unique, but she is not the first filmmaker-theorist to be concerned with images of the mind being stimulated by images on screen, and her most famous forebear in this regard is Sergei Eisenstein. For Eisenstein, writing in 1938, the strength of montage in film lies in the fact that the creative process involves the mind and emotions of the spectator.³¹ He holds that montage prompts spectators to create imagined pictures, recognizing that each person's images will be different.³² Yet rather than refer the spectator back to the vision the creator/s may have had in mind when conceiving the film, as Eisenstein does, Deren

invokes the spectator's everyday experiential knowledge, suggesting that there is a constant and necessary comparison to be made between this and the film they are watching.

While she and Hammid work carefully with the juxtaposition of shots in *Meshes*, it is across sequences and indeed the entire film that this comparative activity takes place, as a seamless corollary to the act of visual perception. She reflects later in 'Cinematography': 'As we watch a film, the continuous act of recognition in which we are involved is like a strip of memory unrolling beneath the images of the film itself, to form the invisible underlayer of an implicit double exposure.'³³ Perception as recollection recalls the philosophy of Henri Bergson (whose work she knew of through Hulme),³⁴ and this dual layer of the visible and invisible pre-empts Maurice Merleau-Ponty's sense in 'Eye and Mind' that sight has a lining.³⁵ Deren is more explicit about the visibility of this lining even as she terms it an invisible underlayer, since spectators are creating a double exposure that is not visible on screen but figured as a palimpsest between mind and screen. Deren's interests in verticality rather than horizontality combine eye and inner eye simultaneously to generate the poetic visual experience of film.

Slow motion is the specific example Deren gives in 'Cinematography' as existing in the mind of spectators rather than on screen: knowing the rhythm and pulse of an action and experiencing what is occurring on screen in relation to this produces a 'double-exposure of time.'³⁶ As the second Maya goes upstairs in *Meshes* her sandaled feet float and bounce gently, breaking continuity with known speeds of climbing stairs, as the camera angle changes and the top half of her body is also pictured. The altered climb is shown across several shots, and it is knowledge of bodily motion in time in comparison with this other kind of

motion that forms the double exposure between mind and screen to which Deren refers. This is in part enabled through memory-images of the first time that the first Maya climbed the stairs at a more conventional pace, but it also taps into that experiential knowledge that allows spectators to feel the relative pace of this different gait, the combined elements of which form the layering of an imagination-image.

This visual layering of images between mind and screen is more than a mere play of imagination, though, since it is initiated from a space in which female subjectivity is turned against itself. This division results in an extreme act of violence against Maya at the end of the film, as she shatters Hammid's mirror image in the bedroom, giving way to a shot of the ocean with mirror fragments on the sand, before he re-enters the house to discover her dead, wrapped in seaweed, the armchair also surrounded by shards. The attack on representation and on systems in which woman is the reflection or signifier of male desire that Patricia Mellencamp reads this scene to be,³⁷ is fundamental to the entire film in which images call to be read for what they are rather than what they represent, and through which a form of circulation outside the sexually different hierarchies of the Symbolic order is sought.

Suffering her films, to recall Deren, involves remaining with the images, feeling them. The imagistic imagination realized through this film in all its muteness breaks with verbal expression, and this is how it becomes for her a homecoming to a language she knows but has never spoken. This mother tongue is not confined to the confusion of images in the Imaginary order since it is still comprehensible by eye and inner eye that work in conjunction with one another. But in so labelling it, Deren emphasizes a female lineage of tacit communication

to which her visual thinking and this first film relate, and that her other films will explore further as she separates from Hammid and works on her own. Her film images exceed any of the languages that she speaks but they commune with her imagistic relation to her place of origin, which lives on as a part of her never to be fully articulated but still communicable. Subsequent structuralist theorists will interrogate in more rigorous terms the notion of film as language, whether poetry or prose, and Gilles Deleuze will later contemplate how filmmakers think in images. Yet on both counts Deren offers a more nuanced and paradoxical vision that is feminized from the start. Her filmic debut with Hammid sets up what it means in visual terms to imagine in images connected to a mother tongue, which both is and is not a language.

Coda

At the opposite end of her career and life, whose tragic brevity could not have been foreseen, Deren addresses a similar series of connections to those that preoccupied her at the outset of her filmmaking. She comments on the links between poetic form, the specificity of visual film language, and mental activity on the part of the spectator in a series of workshop sessions in Woodstock in 1960.³⁸ One of the advertised topics for the workshop was 'Imagining a Film in the Mind's Eye,' a subject that continues her long-standing belief in the power of imagination in mental visual terms, but that is still related to the poetic dimension and spoken of in terms of a language.³⁹ In the workshop one of the precise forms that she discusses with the participants is the making of a three-line visual haiku. She notes that the five-seven-five syllable verbal form of the Japanese haiku was originally a five-line form; she marks out the significance of

the shift to three lines in creating the need for someone – a friend – to complete the remaining parts, writing the last two lines in their mind. In filmic terms, she stresses the importance of the filmmaker first picturing things in their mind and then stimulating the spectator to complete what the visual haiku begins. Deren notes the importance of inserting fades to give spectators time to think,⁴⁰ thereby registering their activity in the form of the film but leaving it figureless and therefore open to individual creativity, which will take as many different forms as there are spectators.

She revisits her interest in the haiku in her lecture at Smith College on 11 April 1961, returning in the Q&A to her own visual thinking, but now also envisaging the possibility of making films that include speech. She notes problems with speech that evokes imagery which might compete with what one sees: 'In other words, I feel that the words are going to have to be the kind of abstract words which only speech is capable of; and abstract ideas.'⁴¹ Thus, Deren is thinking about the integration of speech into film only when it complements the visual images. The suddenness of her death left the future development of her verbal-visual filmic combinations unrealized, but her theoretical ideas and comments here fascinate nonetheless, leaving us to imagine what the spoken word might have added to her lifelong concern with the mute visual realm.

Much of the research for this article was carried out at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, where the Maya Deren Collection is housed.

¹ Maya Deren, 'Letter to James Card,' April 19, 1955, in *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren* (New York: McPherson & Company, 2005), p. 191.

² See VèVè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, eds., *The Legend of Maya Deren, vol 1, part 1: Signatures (1917-1942)* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1984), p. 113 [abbreviated hereafter as *Legend*].

³ Maya Deren Collection, Box 4, Folder 2 [abbreviated hereafter as MDC, 4/2]. These two letters are reproduced in *Legend*, pp. 41-42.

⁴ MDC, 4/2.

⁵ MDC, 4/2, letters to her mother, Nov 4, 1930 and Nov 23, 1931 (corrected in pencil to Jan 1, 1931).

⁶ *Legend*, p. 61 and p. 106.

⁷ *Legend*, p. 295.

⁸ MDC, 1/10.

⁹ *Legend*, p. 127.

¹⁰ *Legend*, p. 148.

¹¹ MDC, 13/no folder, 'Alexander Hammid Interview #3.'

¹² MDC, 19/17, Robert Steele files.

¹³ Occasional writings in French exist in the archive, the most notable being a letter to Salvador Dalí and his wife. Deren apologizes for her spelling mistakes, which she puts down to having learned French orally at school. MDC, 4/6.

¹⁴ *Legend*, p. 231.

¹⁵ *Legend*, p. 471. Deren's comments also resonate here with the melancholia of loss that forges the black sun of Kristevan estrangement from the motherland and the mother tongue. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1987]) and *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991 [1988]).

¹⁶ MDC, 1/8.

¹⁷ MDC, 1/8.

¹⁸ *Legend*, pp. 374-375.

¹⁹ MDC, 1/15, MA thesis, 'The Influence of the French Symbolist School on Anglo-American Poetry,' p. 83.

²⁰ MDC, 1/13, 'Classicism in the Period of Nineteenth Century Romanticism, with Special Reference to Landor, Arnold and Swinburne.'

²¹ MDC, 1/15, MA thesis.

²² In *Essential Deren*, p. 54.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁴ In *Essential Deren*, p. 32.

²⁵ MDC, 13/2, 'Lecture at Vanderbilt Film Symposium, Smith College, Parts I & II,' April 11, 1961.

²⁶ In *Essential Deren*, p. 221.

²⁷ The music added at a later date, composed by Teiji Ito, her third husband, was the only music she said ever felt right. MDC, 18/18, Letter to Robert Steele, Feb 9, 1959. John David Rhodes notes that most screenings of *Meshes* nowadays use this music: see *Meshes of the Afternoon* (London: BFI, 2011), p. 102.

²⁸ Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

²⁹ Annette Michelson, 'Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*,' in Bill Nichols (ed), *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 21-45.

³⁰ Rudolf Arnheim, 'To Maya Deren,' in P. Adams Sitney (ed), *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000 [1970]), pp. 84-87 (p. 86).

³¹ Sergei Eisenstein, 'Word and Image,' in *The Film Sense* [orig. publ. 1939 as 'Montage in 1938'], trans. Jay Leyda (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1970), pp. 3-65 (p. 32).

³² Ibid., p. 33.

³³ In *Essential Deren*, p. 116.

³⁴ In her MA thesis Deren positions Hulme as the 'father of Imagism' and acknowledges his having translated Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics* into English. MDC, 1/15, MA thesis, p. 72. For an illuminating discussion of Deren's Bergsonian metaphysical film aesthetic, see Alison Butler, "'Motor-driven metaphysics:' movement, time and action in the films of Maya Deren,' in *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2007), pp. 1-23.

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' [1961], in Galen Johnson (ed), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith

(Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 121-149 (p. 126 and p. 146).

³⁶ In *Essential Deren*, p. 121.

³⁷ Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, & Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 33.

³⁸ MDC, 13/1 and 13/2, 'Transcription of lectures from tapes 'Maya Deren Workshop Woodstock,' July 10-12, 1960', tapes 2 and 3.

³⁹ In MDC, 19/14, 'Look Out, Woodstock! Here Comes Maya's Movie,' in *The Village Voice*, July 1, 1959, p. 6.

⁴⁰ MDC, 13/2, tape 3, side 2.

⁴¹ MDC, 13/2.